Note by LMB: This speech was given for my acceptance of the 2007 Ohioana Career Award, given by the Ohioana Library, in Columbus, Ohio. The Ohioana Library "collects, promotes, and preserves the work of Ohio writers, musicians, and other artists". Scientists and teachers too, sometimes; my father received an Ohioana Citation in 1971.

Ohioana web presence at http://www.ohioana.org/

Ohioana Speech, Oct. 2007

While in normal speech "author" and "writer" are used interchangeably, I've found it handy to hijack the terms in order to make a useful distinction. The two synonyms give me a way to talk about two parts of a writing career: the actual sweat and uncertainty and frustration and joy of writing, which no one sees (and which would be very boring to watch); and the authorial promotion, which is where the poor shy writer gets out in public and pretends to be exciting in hopes of luring people to the prose. So I'm going to speak first as an author, and last as a writer–which, to me, means getting out of the way between the reader and the text.

I need to tell this author-story first, because it makes me grin.

Exactly twenty years ago this year, when I was first breaking in, I was nominated for the John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award to be given at the 1987 World Science Fiction Convention, the body that also awards the Hugos. Writers are only eligible for this honor in the two years after their first publication, and my first short story had been published in *Twilight Zone Magazine* in 1985, a year before release of my first three novels put me on the map in a far more visible way. I'll not delay here to explain how this glut happened–it's in my bio on my website. But like all new writers in that pre-internet era, I was dependent mainly on reviews to get the word out about my books, so, thinking they might make something of the local-writer angle, bravely approached the book reviewer of the *Columbus Dispatch*. You can guess how well this went. Genre paperback originals, it was gently explained to me, were not literary or important enough to grace their pages. The newspaper readers weren't interested in them, which I thought likely true, if only because most people generally aren't interested in reading fiction of any kind. The reviewers' to-be-read piles were mountains high–they undoubtedly still are–and they had to triage somehow. All right, that gave me a new ambition–breaking into hardcover.

Meanwhile, this new writer award came up, news of a sort, and the *Dispatch* kindly gave me a two-paragraph squib on the topic. It being my second and final year of eligibility, the header read: "Last Chance For Marion Housewife."

Say what? They couldn't even make that "Last Chance For Marion *Writer*"?

As it happened, I did not win the Campbell Award that year. But in fact there were to be other chances, so many and so varied I've now lost count. Every book is a gamble, for writer and publisher. I've placed twenty-two such bets by now, counting a couple presently in the pipeline, all still in

print, with translations to twenty-one foreign languages. It's been a busy two decades.

Some years back I told this tale to my friend Mary Frost Pierson, who used to run the bookstore Mysteries From The Yard in Yellow Springs, who also thought it hilarious. So she and her friend Elaine Roberts stitched up a lovely sampler with that "Last Chance" caption, and gave it to me framed as a gift. I still have it in my home office. Last chance? Define your terms.

I was born literally just up the road from here, in the old University Hospital that has since been converted to a classroom building. My parents had moved to Columbus a few years previously because my father, a new-minted PhD, took a job in research at Battelle Memorial Institute. He shifted to teaching in the Welding Engineering department at OSU in the mid-1950's. It's mentioned in the program notes that he received an Ohioana Citation for his engineering work in 1971, but older central Ohio residents may better remember him as "Bob McMaster, TV Weatherman" at Channel 10. His was the second TV weather show in the country, starting in the early '50s and running till 1965. It was actually from him that I picked up my reading interest in science fiction, which later branched out into the allied genre of fantasy. He passed away in 1986, though he did live to see my first novel published, that gaudy paperback original; my mother passed away in 2003. They both would have been delighted by this honor today–if rather surprised. Making this something of a "Gift of the Magi" moment for me.

So anyway, I was a geek girl before the concept was invented, which was just as uncomfortable in my 1960's teens as you'd imagine, but I eventually found my own way. Writing is a very redemptive profession–even one's failures may be re-classified as raw material. And memoir is not the only genre where the writer finds what to say by opening a slice from neck to navel and rummaging around inside. I'm not sure if as writers get older we become more meditative, or if we just run out of material, but in my most recent fantasy books, I've reversed my usual mode of "far future, far past, far away," and brought my writing home. In a sense.

In science fiction and fantasy, metaphor runs wall-to-wall; setting is just as much a projection from inside the writer's head as every other aspect of the novel. And more than in any other book I've ever written, its landscapes are important to *The Sharing Knife*. Fantasy writer Patricia McKillip says she regularly starts with landscape–it's like the emotional music of the book for her–but for me, that was a bit of a departure (as are many other aspects of what has now become a four-book series.) Because for these books, I found myself mining down to some of the deepest layers of my own experience: the farms, woods, lakes, rivers, animals, plants, insects, people, and weather of my Ohio childhood.

British writers J.R.R. Tolkien and Terry Pratchett are two others who, notably, have come the long way around to get home: the landscapes of Tolkien's own late nineteenth century childhood informing aspects of his tales, Pratchett most recently with the Chalk, home turf of heroine Tiffany Aching and himself. And not just home ground: it's the lost place, the refuge of distant memory.

Like so many other Americans, for me that vanished landscape is engulfed by various sorts of change or urban sprawl, and is now recoverable only in the mind, as inaccessible to daylight reach as any faerie realm. My

childhood was being paved before I'd even finished with it. Many of its people are dead. The land has gone to the use of other more present lives, and no ghosts dwell there for them, nor even guesses of what went before. It's not an American experience only, to be sure, but it's an immensely common one for us. And the fantasy world of *The Sharing Knife* is a deliberately American landscape, not only physically but socially: no kings, no lords, no gods, no state religion, bottom-up rather than top-down political structures, all very much under local control.

One of my lost landscapes was Indian Lake, which still sits about sixty miles northwest of Columbus, if the map doesn't lie. My Grandfather McMaster, who had been a warehouse foreman in Pittsburgh, had a retirement cottage there. One of the joys of my childhood was weekend trips to that muddy lake, with swimming, boating, and especially canoeing. I've not been back there since soon after he died. My mother ventured up once in the late '80s, and reported in some shock that our cottage, which had been expanded into a house by its next owners, was entirely gone, all traces vanished from the soil. But I revisited those cattail-lined shores, transmuted in the imagination as my genre requires and rewards, in the second volume of *The Sharing Knife–Legacy*. In this scene, my character Dag, who not-coincidentally is my age, and his young wife Fawn are visiting this scene of his youth–and mine:

> Two days later, instead of a swimming lesson, Dag took her out in one of the narrow boats. He had a specially shaped hook for his wrist cuff that allowed him to manage his paddle. Fawn, after a brief lesson on the dock, was placed in the front with a paddle of her own. She felt nervous and clumsy at first, looking over all that expanse of water with Dag out of sight behind her, but she soon fell into the rhythm of the task. Around behind Walnut Island, winking water gave way to a surface that was downright glassy, and Fawn relaxed still more. They paused to admire a dead tree reflected in the water, its bare white branches startling against the green of the woods. It was a roosting place for broad-winged hawks, a few circling gracefully overhead or perching on the branches, and Fawn smiled to remember the day they'd been startled by that big red-tail near Glassforge. Any larger predators, Fawn had gathered, were kept off the islands by Lakewalker magic.
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> Up the back channel, the air grew still and hot, and the water clear. Huge elderberry bushes leaned over the banks, their branches heavy with thick clusters of green fruit slowly acquiring a promising rosy blush; in another month the berries would be black and ripe, and Fawn could easily see how a boy might gather them from a boat like this one. A shiny sunfish jumped right into their boat at Dag's feet; Dag, laughing at Fawn's startled squeal, scooped the flopping creature gently back into the water and denied that he had enticed it by Lakewaker persuasion. "Much too small, Spark!"
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> Rounding a tangle of wrack and cattails where red-winged blackbirds traded barking chirps and hoarse whistles, they came at last upon a broad open space crowded with flat lily pads, their white flowers wide to the sun. Thin, iridescent blue dragonflies, and thicker scarlet ones, stitched the air above the marsh, and rows of turtles

sunned themselves on logs, yellow-striped necks stretched out, brown backs gleaming like polished stones. A blue heron stalked slowly along the farther shore; it froze briefly, then darted its long yellow beak into the water. A silvery minnow flashed as the heron twisted its neck around, gulped, and then stood folded for a moment looking smug. Fawn hardly knew whether it made her happier to watch the flowers, or the contented look on Dag's face. Dag sighed in satisfaction, but then frowned.

"I thought this was the same place, but it seems smaller. This water is a lot shallower, too. I remember it as being well over my head. Did I take a wrong turn somewhere?"

"It looks plenty deep to me. Um... how old were you, again, first time you found this place?"

"Eight."

"And how tall?"

Dag began to open his mouth, then grinned sheepishly. "Shorter than you, Spark."

"Well, then."

"Well, indeed." He laid his paddle across his lap and just gazed around.

The water lilies, though beautiful, were the same common variety Fawn had sometimes seen in quiet backwaters around West Blue, she decided. She had seen cattails, dragonflies, turtles, blackbirds and herons before. There was nothing new here, and yet... *this place is magical.* The silence in the warm, moist air, broken only by the little noises of the marsh, seemed holy in her ears, as if she were hearing a sound beneath all sound. *This is what having groundsense must be like, all the time*. The thought awed her.

They sat quietly in the narrow boat, beyond all need of words, until the heat of the sun began to grow uncomfortable; with a sigh, Dag took up his paddle once more and turned them around. His stroke left a glossy whirlpool spiraling down into the clear water, and Fawn's eye followed it. *This is where his heart is anchored. I can see why*.

Thank You.